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THE MALAY TAPIR (*TAPIRUS INDICUS*).

BY

W. S. THOM.

(*With one plate*).

The Burmese call the tapir *Kyan-thu-daw*. I have never heard it called *Tarashu*. *Tarashu* does not appear to me to be a Burmese name although it is mentioned in the *Fauna of British India*, and in E. H. Peacock's book *A Game Book for Burma*. The name may be peculiar to Tavoy or Mergui where alone in Burma this animal is found, and where true Burmese is not spoken.

The tapirs, rhinoceroses, horses and wild asses, are included in the Perissodactyle or Three-toed Ungulates. Five species of tapirs are known to exist: of these four are confined to Central and South America; while the fifth is an inhabitant of the Oriental region, where it is found only in Lower Burma, the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra. The fact that tapirs are now found in limited areas separated by many thousands of miles from each other provides a good instance of the rare phenomenon of 'Discontinuous Distribution'. We know that in past geological epochs tapirs were abundant over a large portion of the Earth's surface. Their fossil remains have been dug up in many European countries. One explanation is that the tapirs were once prevalent in the northern countries. Owing to changes of climate and other conditions which are not very clear, they migrated southwards, and the existing tapirs now found in the Malay countries and America are the descendants of these emigrants. Or it may be that tapirs were once continuously distributed over the Earth's surface from north to south, that they ceased to exist in the northern countries and we have now only to deal with the few scattered remnants of what was once a widely distributed tribe.

The Malay Tapir, which is the largest of the group, is readily distinguished from all its South American cousins by the parti-coloured hide of the adult; the head, limbs, and front part of the body being dark brown or black, while all that portion of the body situated behind the shoulders including the rump, and the upper part of the thighs, together with the tips of the ears, are greyish white, or white in the adult. In very young animals on the other hand, that is to say those not exceeding from four to six months in age, the ground colour is blackish-brown or black marked (as in the young of the American species), with longitudinal streaks of yellow on the under parts. The hair too is markedly denser than in the full-grown animal. In height an adult tapir stands from three to three and a half feet at the withers and about four inches more at the rump; the length from the tip of the snout to the root of the tail measured along the curves of the body being about eight feet.

Its habits are in all probability very similar to those of the American representatives of the genus. Like the rhinoceros, tapirs love wallowing in water and in mud holes in the deepest recesses of the jungle. Another habit common to tapirs and some rhinoceros is that their droppings are sometimes found in large heaps. They also browse on twigs and leaves like rhinoceros. All tapirs are extremely shy and retiring animals dwelling amid thick jungle in the neighbourhood of water to which they take readily. They are easily tamed and make very docile pets, following one about like a dog. A young one was caught in Tavoy, Lower Burma, 26 years or so ago and presented to Major Reid, a one time Deputy Commissioner of Tavoy. This animal was, if I mistake not, subsequently given to Colonel King, I.M.S., Burma, who presented it to the Maharajah of Mysore, India. I wonder if it is still alive. These animals are generally nocturnal in their habits. Their sense of sight, smell, and hearing is very acute. I should say that their sense of scent was equal to that of any deer, elephant, wild cattle, thakin, or rhinoceros. I would also go as far as to say that their sense of sight is more acute than that of any animal to be found in the jungles of Burma. I have tracked up and followed tapir on many occasions accompanied by only one experienced Burman hunter, and although we could both cover the ground as noiselessly as cats, the animals invariably stampeded before we came up with them and made off at a lumbering gallop uttering a succession of squeaks and snorts. My intention on those occasions was not to shoot the animals but to study their habits and also to get a photograph. These animals are rarely met with during the day unless they are tracked up to their resting places and wallows or are driven out of their haunts by the larger felines or by beaters. They usually inhabit low-lying, flat, damp, swampy ever-green forests, but in Tavoy I have also come across them in jungle in close proximity to villages. They are, if I am not mistaken, never found in hilly country so far as Burma is concerned. I do not suppose any sportsman in Burma has seen as many tapir in their wild state as I have over a period of about two years. It may be thought that being such shy and timid animals they would be found far away from human habitations, but I have found their tracks in dorian and jackfruit gardens adjacent to villages. In the *Bombay Natural History Society's Journal*, vol. xx, No. 2, dated the 18th October 1910, p. 515, Mr. J. B. Mercer-Adam, F.C.H., of the Forests stated that a Burman of Kado village, Moulmein, had seen a tapir in his garden in the evening. The Burman although he did not recognize it as a tapir described it as a very large pig, half black and half white. Both tapir and rhinoceros revel in a country where the forests are dense and where the rainfall is heavy. Tapir never inhabit the high mountainous country frequented by the Sumatran rhinoceros (*R. sumatrensis*).

The Malay Tapir, which like rhinoceros is now entirely protected, offers little attraction to a European sportsman since it yields nothing in the way of a trophy except the skull,

skin and hoofs, and it is not given to charging or attacking human beings.

No European, Burman, Indian, or Karen hunter seeks to kill or catch tapir unless it be to capture a young for sale to some Indian prince or zoo; as their blood, unlike the two species of rhinoceros found in Burma, viz. *R. sumatrensis* and *R. sondaicus*, appears to possess no valuable properties. Any animal captured alive would of course belong to the Forest Department as it would come under the nomenclature of forest produce. A good many of these animals were trapped in pits and nets during beats in the bad old days for food principally, not only in Burma but in the Malay States. The residents of the two districts of Tavoy and Mergui however consider it a sin to kill a tapir; because, as the legend has it and as its Burmese name, *Kyan-thu-daw*, seems to imply, the animal is considered to be holy and more or less sacred because periodically about the full and new moon it visits the nearest salt-lick or hot sulphur springs of mineral and saline mud in the vicinity of its haunts as if to go into retreat, or to make as it were its orisons. The word *Kyan-thu-daw* literally translated would mean *Kyan* a rhinoceros and *thu-daw*, a person devoted to the service of religion, or in other words the worshipping or holy tapir; although why they should prefix the word '*Kyan*' before the *thu-daw* I am unable to say. It may perhaps be because the shape of the animal's foot is not unlike that of a rhinoceros. Indeed, in the old days, newcomers when out after game in the Tavoy and Mergui districts often mistook the tracks of a tapir for those of a small rhinoceros. Rhinoceros as a matter of fact visit salt-licks at regular intervals, once or twice a month with the new and the full moon as do tapir, and perhaps the Tavoyans and Merguians consider the tapir to be a religious attendant or follower of the rhinoceros; hence the name *Kyan-thu-daw*.

The first and only tapir bagged by me was in the Tavoy District. It was at a place called Mijyaunghlaung (the resort of crocodiles), where a magnificent morass of hot bubbling sulphur springs of mineral water and mud may be found situated in the heart of virgin tree, bamboo and cane forest, a veritable health resort of all wild animals who partake of the mud and waters in order to rid themselves of internal parasitic worms. As a matter of fact I was not out after tapir at the time but after 'tsaing' or banting (*Bibos banting birmanicus*) and bison (*B. gaurus*).

The water and mud in this morass or swamp was so hot that one could not walk in it bare-footed. The surface was pitted with the tracks of elephant, bison, tapir, sambar, hog deer and 'tsaing', I heard the lumbering galloping sounds of the tapir's hoofs approaching, so unlike those of any other animal, excepting perhaps the buffalo and the rhinoceros. It was conjectured that it must be one or other of these and not a female tapir with a young one. It was all over in a few seconds. The jungle was dark and gloomy and objects were not easily discernible; the animal consequently as she galloped past received before it was known what manner of beast she was, a right and a left

behind the shoulder from a 12-bore 'Cosmos' ball and shot gun, which brought her to the ground with a crash into a nullah 150 yards further on, shot through both lungs. The young one which appeared in view some 50 yards or so behind its mother after I had fired at the latter, was captured after a short struggle and kept alive for a period of about a month when it succumbed to shock and blood poisoning in spite of every attention and a liberal use of antiseptics, as it was found that both it and her dam had been badly mauled either by a leopard, wild dogs, or a tiger. Probably it was a leopard that had attacked them with the object of making a meal of one or both; but had been frustrated in the attempt. The young one became so tame before its death that it used to follow me about when I called it, and eat plantains and jackfruit and the leaves of the latter tree from my hands.

The tapir has no means of defending itself with the exception of the kicking power of the hind legs which are not however propelled with sufficient force to be of much use as a means of defence sufficient to ward off an attack from the 'felidae' and wild dogs, their only enemies besides Man. The shape and position of the snout of the animal also makes any attempt at using its teeth with any great hope of success, well nigh impossible. If the hind legs could be used with the rapidity and force employed, shall we say, by an ostrich, horse, elephant, bison or even a mule, it might have some chance of holding its own. It is probably due to the tapir's acute sense of smell, sight and hearing that it is saved from early extinction. Its snout, like the trunk of an elephant, is extremely sensitive to pain and a struggle between a tapir and either a leopard, tiger or a pack of wild dogs would invariably end in the death of the tapir. The feet or hoofs make excellent trophies if properly mounted by a good taxidermist. I have all four feet of the only tapir shot by me beautifully mounted by Messrs. Rowland Ward, two of them as spirit cheroot lighters, one as a call bell, and the fourth as an inkstand. The flesh of the tapir although coarse is palatable enough and not unlike that of rhinoceros meat, but neither animal is sought after on account of its meat. The people moreover believe that the consumption of tapir flesh tends to cause leprosy which of course is a fallacy like many other of their beliefs.

Before ending my article on Tapir I would like to quote here a few extracts from an article which was published in the *Rangoon Gazette* of August 1935 by a correspondent of that paper; and which seems to me very apt. 'Nature', he says, 'is capable of surprises and even jests that upset our pre-conceived notions and theories, and not the least remarkable of these surprises is the tapir described by Mr. H. C. Smith, Honorary Game Warden of Burma, in his series on the wild animals of Burma'.

'When we think of wild animals we instinctively divine the thought further with recollections of animals we have read or heard or seen in zoos and films, we have had witness of the ferocity of the tiger and the lion; there is a smile for the antics of the monkey tribe, or for the ungainly absurdity of the rhinoceros

on his stumpy legs; and there is wonder and delight at the swift grace of the deer and antelope tribes. But what shall we say of the tapir? It is a perpetual refutation of the general application of theories on the struggle for existence. It is a shy and mild and gentle creature. It is easily tamed in captivity. It is nothing much to look at and its white overcoat is an amusing vagary of jungle fashion. The female is bigger than the male. A small shrill squeal is the only sound recorded in connection with the animal. It likes water and is credited by some with the extraordinary power of walking along the bottom of deep pools instead of swimming. It wanders silently and unobtrusively in the densest evergreen. It is not poached, the jungle people regarding it as the fate of many philosophers living out of their time with "almost amused contempt". And the tigers do not seem to kill it. It is, as Mr. H. C. Smith remarks, a harmless and interesting animal. The tapir is in fact an enigma. It may be a survivor of some more gentle and legendary time, or it may be wandering in unique isolation in a world not yet mature enough for its wisdom. We should therefore cherish and protect the tapir, just as so many of the wild animals of Burma should be protected in case they are exterminated.'

Alas I am afraid I must plead guilty to having shot one of these inoffensive animals under rather peculiar circumstances in the Tavoy District many years ago, in the year 1909 to be exact, i.e., some twenty-six years ago. I wrote an account of this animal's death at the time and also described the tapir and its habits in detail. This appeared in a number of the *Asian* sporting paper which has now been defunct for many years.

These reminiscences of mine are after all of days gone by when much game was shot by sportsmen. This is a new age of licenses, game laws and protection. The old days are gone never to return.